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ABSTRACT

When there is something we want to know, we usually ask experts, but rarely do we ask children about their own childhood. This paper looks at children's perceptions and responses in relation to programming on children's television. Topics include: (1) what are children's programs?; (2) when do children become adults?; (3) criteria for quality; (4) operationalization; (5) children's TV in a child's perspective; and (6) fascination and television. Results from observations of children's television viewing are then listed, including the following: (1) programs with children in leading parts gained the most interest; (2) concrete stories, with a dramatic climax or a change in rhythm, gained more interest than program sequences with a concrete story; (3) watching together with other children increased children's attention and was a positive communication factor; (4) when the story had a simple, logical development, the children seemed to grasp better the relationship and continuity between different sequences and the story line; and (5) sequences whereby the children could associate their own experiences increased their fascination. Following this list of observations, the paper explores the question: "Who Defines Quality: Experts and Parents or Children and Youngsters?" The paper concludes by noting that it will be a challenge for the future to analyze and evaluate the importance of the various perspectives of both children and adults, and that "children and youngsters prefer a fascinating story rather than a programme loaded with explicit explanations." (WJC)

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ED 402 024

Children's television programmes in a qualitative perspective

Who defines quality? A discussion based on an analysis about children's fascination and traditional adult criteria for good TV programmes for children.

Lecture presented at the "Nordic TV days" in Bergen, Norway, June 1996.

Karin Hake

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Summary

When there is something we want to know we usually ask experts. This is, however, not the case when we want to learn about children. We rarely ask children about their own childhood.

Trond Viggo Torgersen, former ombudsman for children in Norway, stated this at the opening of the fair "Childhood in Norway", March 1995.

Children's expressions and thoughts about TV programmes are in fact expert statements! We have focused on children's programmes from *what they experience as quality*, and looked upon quality *from the wievers`s point of view:* how children and youngsters perceive and respond to programmes. Traditionally we have been overly sceptical to using children as informants. Can we get hold of *children's* perspective on how *they* experience quality? The study presented may contribute to give a "quality image" of television programmes from a *child's point of view*. We have chosen *fascination* as a key term for quality: what is significant for programmes that spellbound children?

Programmes that many youngsters often watch are not necessarily what they describe as quality programmes. There are examples of programmes that are watched by many youngsters but at the same time they dissociate themselves from them and consider them as "poor quality" or "clichés".

Different groups - producers, children or experts - stress different criteria when evaluating a programme. In a changing media situation in a changing society it is necessary to consider different perspectives to have as broad a base as possible to produce *familiar, engaging and relevant programmes of high standards.*

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1. What are children's programmes?

We instinctively think of Sesame Street and Donald Duck. But is that all?

Lars Dencik, a Swedish psychologist, makes use of the term *"intentional children's programmes"* about programmes made especially for children. Dencik then uses the term *"real children's programmes"* about programmes that are *not* especially targeted for young people, but that they nonetheless watch: programmes like The Eurovision song contest, Mr. Bean and MacGyver.

Kirsten Drotner, a Danish researcher, characterises the phenomenon like this:

> One thing is TV programmes targeted for children and youth. *Children's choice of programmes* is a completely different matter. The programmes watched by most children and youngsters are not necessarily meant for this group. In fact, only among the youngest group there is a correlation between what they watch and the programmes that are really targeted for them. (Drotner, 1995).

Therefore, we should expand the perspective of children's programmes to include a lot more than the *intentional* children's programmes when discussing the quality of those programmes that children watch. In one of the analyses that I use as a basis for my reflections, I did, however, choose to focus on an *intentional* children's programme.

2. When do children become adults?

> The age at which a "child" becomes an "adult" is subject to further consideration. The tradition in most countries is to choose 14, 15 and 16 as the first adult age. *However, in practice, children's programmes are intended, and primarily viewed by children up to the age of about eleven. There is a case for redefining "adults" as aged 12 and over* (EBU 1991) (italics by K.H.).

Consequently, there has traditionally been a distinction between childhood and adulthood at around 14, 15 or 16 years. EBU suggests that we have to redefine adults as *age 12 and above* because in practice, it turns out that children's programmes are watched mostly by children up to 11. Both Scandinavian and other international studies have shown that there is a distinction between children and adults, between children's programmes and adult programmes, at 12 years of age. Both parents, teachers and producers sometimes have a tendency to "extend" childhood well into the teens, and thereby extending the distinction between children and adults at around 15 or 16 years.

There could be several reasons as to why many might believe the distinction between children and adults would be *later* than by 12 years. Perhaps the parent generation has problems in leaving the nursery, making youngsters more childish than their wishes, interests and conduct should tell? Has childhood been mede shorter? Do adults have a different relationship to the transition from a harmonic, dreamlike children's world to the hard and real adult world than children do have? The study *Baywatch is just a cliché* (Hake, 1996), tried , among other subjects, to analyze this distinction in more detail. What are the characteristics and what reflections do children and youngsters themselves make about their TV habits?

3. Criteria for quality

It is difficult to set up clear and generally accepted measures for quality. It has to do with our taste, our knowledge, our own experience of good and bad, of joy and despair.

We have focused on children's programmes based on *experienced quality* and studied quality from the *receptor's perspective*, through the perception of children and youngsters - their reactions and experiences.

Henrik Søndergaard, a Danish media researcher, states this about examining quality:

> A *qualitative* profile of each programme is only valid "if you are capable of defining what is understood by quality". Quality is not absolute, but must always be defined in relation to certain objects and certain target groups. *Therefore quality must be measured as to whether certain goals are achieved; and in relation to the target groups' own evaluation of the said programmes* (italics by K.H.) (Søndergaard, 1995).

4. Operationalisation

The assistant director of NRK Television once said that

> *the more distant the producers are from the target group in age and experience - the more important it is to obtain the target group's perspective, response and reaction to a programme.*

Is it possible getting to know children's perspective on *experienced quality*?

Due to implicit or explicit conceptions, we have traditionally been overly sceptical, to using children as informants.

> Research with young children of preschool age, however, raises problems. One limitation is that they can hardly communicate their reactions in more subtle psychological content. On the other hand, clinical methods for interviewing children

about their media experiences is so far a neglected area and a challenge for the future (Rydin, 1996).

Children's TV in a child's perspective

I have studied what happens in the encounter between a child and a programme, and observed how 5 and 6 year-olds perceive and react to a pilot programme, a pre-testing project designed in connection with the concept development of a TV- series. We used individual interviews as well as video observation during screening to register both verbal and non-verbal communication. There are, however, a lot more factors than the story itself that influences children's understanding, perception and interpretation of TV programmes. The setting in which the wieving taks place and the psychological characteristics and earlier experience of the child are crucial factors. Still there should be possible to find certain typical features that may tell us something about what they experience as *quality*: what do they experience as fascinating sequences?

To be able to answer this question, it is necessary to examine what sort of sequences trigger the audience - what is most appealing? We have used the concept *fascination* as a key concept to present children's relationship to a TV programme, how *the child* experiences this programme's strong and weak sides. The term *fascination* is in Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1981) is defined as follows:

> The quality of holding the interest strongly - especially as if by a spell; the ability to enthrall; an irresistible attraction or charm.

Fascination and television

Birgitta Qvarsell, a Swedish researcher, states the following about *fascination* as a phenomenon in children's relations to media:

> Instead of turning our thumbs down for children's interest, we should wonder what experiences they get being involved with the media, what children get out of it (---). We have to look at children's attraction to the media and ask ourselves what they do with the message, not how they are influenced in the short or long term. (--). She states i.a. that *fascination* mentally can be about *presence or absence* (Qvarsell, 1988).

Childrens *fascination* of a programme can be expressed in many ways. Is the child an attentive viewer or does he or she let the pictures shimmer past? Does the child perceive the programme as familiar, making it cry, smile or laugh? Does the child associate what it sees

with its own experience and talk about it? Do the children remember the story so they can retell it later?

We want to describe the relationship between the child and the programme by means of *presence or absence of fascination*. Based on the *fascination* concept, we focus on the following variables as subject in the study:

1. Children's attention and concentration.
2. Children's associations with their own experiences while watching.
3. Psychological closeness between child and programme signified by emotional expressions as joy or excitement and expressed by body language and/or verbal statements.
4. Children's memory: their ability to retell the story later.

Factors such as these can be *main criteria for quality*.

Another measure of *fascination* could be the child's activities *after* the programme is finished. To describe this, however, would necessitate to follow the children's reactions for some time after the primary field work. This was outside the scope of the analysis.

Results

The central perspectives found in the young children's programme perception were as follows:

- Dramatised stories on subjects that are central in children's everyday life created close relations between the viewer and the programme. Subjects based on simple and familiar daily experiences about moral dilemmas, with children in the leading parts, resulted in most interest and got most attention.
- Programme sequences presenting *processes* step by step did not get as much attention from the children as did sequences with a concrete story. Ordinary TV-reports were not fascinating enough for these viewers. A more explicit essence in form of a dramatic climax or by a change of form or rhytm, increased attention and interest.
- Watching together with other children increased the attention and was a positive communicating factor.

- When the story had a simple, logical development, the children seemed to grasp better the relationship and continuity between different sequences and the story-line.
- Sequences where the children could associate to their own experience increased their fascination.

Is it possible to extract general valid criteria from experiences of a small group of children's viewing experiences of one particular programme? Children have different capabilities of interpreting and understanding TV stories. It is not possible to give *one* answer as to what is a good TV programme based on this study. But we may talk about transference of knowlwdge in a more analytic, approximate sense. This may give valuable reflections in programme development.

5. Who defines quality: Experts - parents or children and youngsters?

Children's programmes of good quality can be defined based on educational criteria as parents and teachers often do, or dramaturgic criteria as professional producers do. Or from the point of view of experience, like children do.

In an attempt to evaluate quality of programmes for young children, Lilian Katz (1993) operates with five different perspectives. Katz uses these perspectives to assess quality of "early childhood education". We have, however, transferred thesee principles in her perspective thinking to programme development and research.

1. From above as seen by visiting adults and observers.
2. From below as seen by the children themselves.
3. From the outside as seen by the parents served by the programme.
4. From inside as seen by the staff who work in the programme.
5. As perceived by the society and its representatives who sponsor the programme.

(Katz, 1993)

We will try to concretise some of these perspectives:

From above and from the outside

Adults often use a perspective based on criteria as to what is "good for the children" or they try to put themselves in the place of a child and base their statements on that. In debates between e.g. parents and teachers, it is noticeable that they are eager to define what children *should* see and "what is good for them". Often if the world and daily life of children and youngsters deviate from an evolutionary, psychologically and culturally conditioned norm, this may produce anxiety among parents and teachers. Both in-house TV-programme discussions and earlier studies have, however, shown that children sometimes think a programme is appealing although it is heavily criticised by adults.

Eli Åm, a child researcher, puts it like this:

> Do we have to simply accept that children and adults can perceive a TV programme in highly different ways? (--) Is it possible to overcome this "dualism" between a child's perception and an adult's quality demands? What criteria are superior to the evaluation of the child? In other areas this is less of a problem. For instance, we do not consider sweets to be good for children except in small quantities, even if they do cherish the taste of chocolate higher than anything else! When it comes to children's perception of TV programmes it is not longer that easy to check the child's own evaluation (Åm, 1991).

Different groups - producers, children or experts -emphasize different criteria as their first claim when evaluating a programme. Professional producers may have as their first claim a set of criteria that only partly coincides with *the audience's perception of quality*. Perhaps very deliberate and well considered choices made by the producer concerning pictures and camera angles do not quite match the audience's aesthetic experience of the same pictures. The criteria might also change according to genre. Quality criteria for fiction differs from those of news or children's programmes. One way of creating excitement in crime series is by quickly switching camera angles and pictures. This style of producing would make a poor quality children's programme, as young children need to dwell, slowly, at each p cture in order to understand.

From below

This perspective can be presented very simply like this:

> When 4 year-old Peter, who had been glued to the set all December, was asked how he like "Amalies jul" - last years Christmas series on Norwegian children's TV - he said firmly: I didn't like it. It was a stupid series - 'cause it ended!

From inside

This will be represented through those who work with the programme, e.g. the producers. There is a long-winded and detailed process with a lot of deliberate and well-founded choices made before and during production. What is the message? What subject do we want to present? What identity should the main characters have? Which attitudes do we want to present? Particularly concerning children's programmes it is a challenge to select and instruct children who can act and still be natural and convincing?

Policy makers og society in general may be faced with a strategic dilemma: on which perspective and on what evaluation criteria should they base their policy? How do we handle a potential dualism?

6. «Baywatch is just a cliché»

Korczak, a Polish researcher states:

> Children's own perspective on their lives and their existence gives us the best knowledge of their conditions.

Children's expressions and thoughts about a TV programme are, in fact, expert statements! In an analysis *Baywatch is just a cliché* (Hake, 1996) 10 and 14 year-olds were interviewed about their channel and programme preferences. The 10 year-olds represented *the qualified child viewer* and the 14 year-olds *the young adult*. The aim of the study was to give a more detailed insigt of programme preferences as expressed by the youngsters expressed it themselves. How did they describe programmes they felt were relevant for them and of high quality?

Quality - cliché

Is it a fact that youngsters prefer to be passive consumers of trash and soap?
If they had «Baywatch» 7 days a week, would this be ultimate happiness?
Is what they actually watch the same programmes that they consider to be of high quality?

The variety of the programmes they preferred was huge among the 14 year-olds. They preferred popular fiction but nevertheless considered a lot of these programmes to be of poor quality. The 14 year-olds want both rest and recreation while at the same time they want to feel a familiarity with their own daily life and meet situations and persons they could recognise easily. They mentioned "harassment, drugs, violence, cruelty to animals and disease

- this is our daily life" as subjects they would like to watch on TV. Several gave examples of documentaries they had perceived as familiar - programmes they said were "about reality" - with grave, socially related problems that they found important and significant in relation to their lives and personal development, establishing a place for themselves in the adult world. This can be interpreted as a wish for a media content that is *familiar and relevant*.

The Danish Media Council says:

> *A media content with relevance* means that it partly fulfils the here and now function, that children and youngsters can use in their daily lives; and partly imparts information, arts and experience that will be important to them in the long run in their personal developement (The Media Council, 1996).

Accordingly, we base our research on what youngsters themselves point out as *quality programmes*. We have used children and youngsters as a source of knowledge.

> *Baywatch is just a cliché*. It is just dolls running around on a beach, believing they're gorgeous. Then it's all just plastic. I've seen it a couple of times, if I didn't have anything else to do. I don't know why. (Morten, 14 years old).

Those who watch «Baywatch» and have a negative attitude by calling it a cliché - feeling that a series like Baywatch "has become trite from overexposure" (Collins Concise English Dictionary 1992). The youngsters states that these programmes are merely pastime, not something they watch based on artistic content or good entertainment.

> The attraction of popular fiction presumably lies in the mental rest you get when you screen off your daily life and its protecting streams of thought, and instead are filled by thoughts less demanding --- you watch these things so you will not have to think ---a state of "happy forgetfulness" (Høijer, 1991).

Even though youngsters often cannot abstract what signifies a quality programme for them, they are still fairly clear in their description of their favourite programmes as Baywatch. There are examples of programmes that have many viewers, but that would still be hard to characterise as quality programmes from this criterion alone (Raboy, 1991). And vice versa, a programme may have *few* viewers, but still give a *high quality experience* to those who did watch it.

If there does not seem to be a complete correlation between what the youngsters choose to watch, and programmes that they define as quality programmes. Their TV viewing has several functions. TV as pastime may well consist of programmes that the youngsters themselves consider "clichés" (trite from overexposure). There are examples of programmes

that a lot of youngsters watch, but that they all the same dissociate themselves from, and consider as "poor programmes" or "clichés".

The Danish Media Council said this about quality programmes for children and youngsters:

> *A media content with quality* means that the media give children and youngsters possibilities of unbiased and thorough information as well as artistic experience and entertainment. It has to do with giving children and youngsters both a media content they instinctively want, and an opposite, a content that challenges them, e.g. by giving insight into new areas (The Danish Media Council no. 3, 1996).

7. Conclusion

In a time of an ever increasing rivalry between TV channels, it is important to have more knowledge about *why* the audience choose the way they they do, and on *what criteria* they base their choices This should be part of evaluating whether a public service channel achieve goals like *high programme quality. A goal aiming at maximising the audience is vital to commercial channels. For a public service channel the work of evaluating quality is a tool just as important to substantiate that the work also satisfies the quality aims.*

In the future it will be important to bring more programme categories, genres, and various measures of quality into focus. Besides, one should continue to discuss the qualitative dimension with criteria from *an inside perspective* - the professional side - *a perspective from below* - from children themselves, and *a perspective from above* - from adults. Therefore it is a challenge for future research to analyze and evaluate the importance of the various perspectives.

The normative perspective

It is also important to focus and discuss what TV programmes we *want* children and youngsters to be fascinated and absorbed by. *The normative perspective* is represented by viewpoints from parents and teachers, cultural workers and those who administer superordinate goals and plans. This perspective is also relevant in the media debate, alongside with the programme makers' professional criteria for quality, and children and youngsters' own reflections on these subjects.

The ideal programme - does it exist?

Are there examples and common denominators of an "ideal programme" that children and youngsters are fascinated by *and* that satisfies the different quality criteria from different groups of adults?

In a changing media situation in a changing society it is necessary to look at different perspectives to get as broad a base as possible for adapting familiar, engaging and relevant high quality programmes. When it comes to the perception of a TV programme it is not easy to check children's own appreciation. Ivar Selmer Olsen, a Norwegian child culture researcher, claims that children and youngsters rather prefer a good drama to an adult's interpretation and over-explicit message cramming, and he puts it like this: "Children and youngsters prefer a fascinating story rather than a programme loaded with explicit explanations.»

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